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FLORA. FROM A DISH BY BERNARD PALISSY

## Palissy the Man and Palissy the Potter

BY HORACE TOWNSEND

**T**HREE great artists there are, the records of whose lives, quite apart from their artistic endeavors, are of intense interest to us, and of these three two were potters, Benvenuto Cellini, the amorous, passionate Italian lover of the beautiful, Josiah Wedgwood, the smug, self-complacent, entirely respectable Englishman, and Bernard Palissy the patient, self-subduing, almost ascetic Huguenot Frenchman; can one, in searching the annals of time find three characters so outwardly dissimilar? Yet there are links which connect the Frenchman with the Italian as well as

with the Englishman. Thus both Cellini and Palissy have told, in their own inimitable words the stories of their life-labors, and while Palissy burnt up his furniture and even the flooring of his house to heat his furnaces, Cellini acted somewhat similarly during the casting of his bronze Perseus. Both Palissy and Wedgwood, again, spent long years, and brought to their task intellectual abilities of a high order in an endeavor to solve the mystery discovered centuries before by the Chinese, of making Porcelain take the place of Pottery.

Bernard Palissy was born, it is now

decided, in the year 1510 and at La Chapelle Biron, a village close to the little town of Biron in the Province of Perigord. His father seems to have been a glass-painter and taught the trade to his son, who even in his youth, must have given evidence of the possession of a mental discernment and keen observation which eventually led him to acquire a knowledge of chemistry, geology, botany and other branches of natural history. That he was a skilful draughtsman is shown by the fact that as a mere boy he added to the family income by drawing the portraits of his friends and neighbors. But glass-painting at that particular time, and especially in a small village like that in which the Palissys dwelt, was not a remunerative occupation and so, when he was in his eighteenth year, he shouldered his knapsack, bade farewell to all at home, and started to find his own place in the great world outside. Of his next ten years of wandering we have scant record, but it may easily be gathered from

passages in his own writings that he traveled over a great portion of France and supported himself by his trade of glass-painting, by drawing portraits and by surveying and mapping landed estates. About the year 1538 he finally settled himself in the town of Saintes, and, having given hostages to fortune, by marrying and becoming the father of a family, he undertook to make a living by the practice of his various avocations. In 1542 when he was over thirty years of age the turning point of his life was reached. Then there was shown to him a cup of foreign, he himself was wont to aver, of Italian origin. "It was," he writes, "turned and enamelled with so much beauty that I began to think that if I should discover how to make enamels, I could make earthen vessels and other things very prettily, because God had gifted me with some knowledge of drawing," and then, despite that he had no technical knowledge at all he began to seek for the enamels (where, and not in the paste as is really the case, he imagined the secret to lie), as a man who gropes in the dark. It was a bold undertaking for one of Palissy's years to wander aside so far from the beaten track of his former occupations, but he did not hesitate for an instant. The story, in detail, of his struggles, as told by himself in his "L'art de Terre" has made the name of Palissy forever famous as a man quite apart from his reputation as a potter. With the tale of Bruce's spider it has gone into history as an example of the ultimate triumph of patience.

So familiar to all is the romance of the next fifteen years of Palissy's life that a brief mention seems all that is necessary. Year after year he worked doggedly on, using the broken shards of earthenware vases as the medium for melting his enamels, firing them now in his own furnace, now in the kilns of the local potters and now in the ovens of the glass-makers. It was at the lowest ebb of his fortunes when he was reduced to the utmost penury and was using a furnace in his own house built by his own hands that he kept



LUMIÈRE. BY BERNARD PALISSY. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



LUMIÈRES BY BERNARD PALISSY. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

up the heat by breaking up first the supports of his fruit trees, then his household furniture and finally the flooring itself of his work-room. To use his own words, "I was obliged to burn the props which supported the trees of my garden, which being burned, I was obliged to burn the tables and floors of my house to make the second composition melt; I was in an agony that I cannot describe, for I was all dried up and parched from the work, and the heat of the furnace. My shirt had not been dry for more than a month, and also to console me they laughed at me, and even those who ought to have helped me, went crying about the town that I was burning my floor; and by these means made me lose my credit and they thought me mad." At length Palissy engaged the services of a local potter whom he lodged and boarded on the credit supported by an obliging innkeeper, but after six months he was obliged to dismiss the man, giving him his own clothes in lieu of wages.

Then the flints in the mortar burst with the heat and sprinkled the melted glaze of the Vases with splinters, so ruining them that he broke them up as any other course would have been "a discredit and lowering of my honour" and their ashes produced a result no less disastrous than that due to the flint-stones. The end of it all was that while Palissy did not discover his dreamed-of enamel he made himself into so efficient a potter that he forsook all his other occupations and to the end of his life earned a competence by making ornamental pottery. His works were purchased by the Queen, Catherine de Medici, by the nobles of the court and by such local noblemen as the Sire de Pons and the Baron de Jarnac. All these were eager to acquire works anent the making of which there was no little mystery and, as money among those in high position was plentiful, Palissy from starvation emerged into what may be called prosperity. Among the more

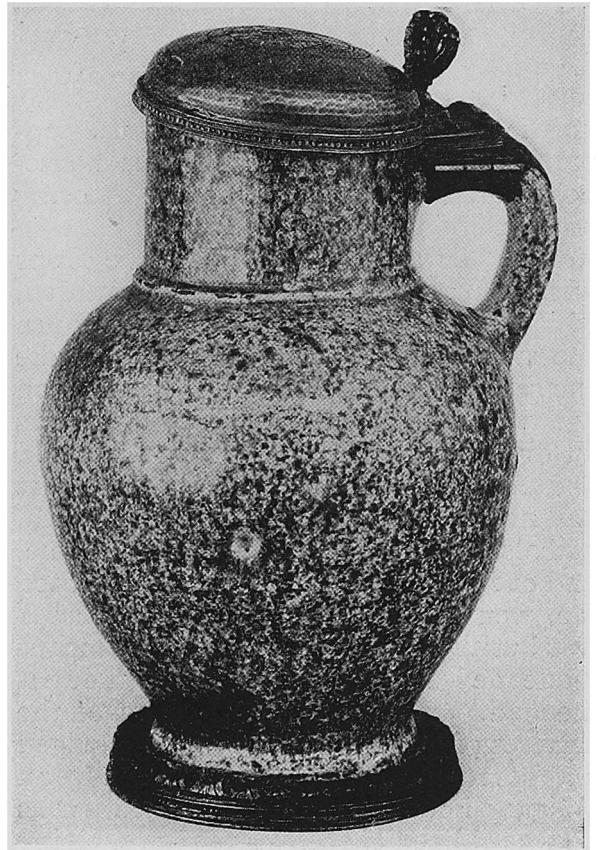


SAUCIÈRE WITH FIGURE RELIEFS BY BERNARD PALISSY.  
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

prominent of his patrons were the Constable, Anne de Montmorenci, who commissioned him to adorn his new Château which was a building under Jean Bullant, the architect about four leagues from Paris. Here he is said to have painted all the windows, to have floored the Chapel and Galleries with tiles of his own manufacture and to have built in the garden a grotto of glazed pottery, the forerunner of one he later erected for the Queen in the Garden of the Tuilleries.

His plain speaking about the Reformed religion, however, could not pass unnoticed by the religious authorities. For years he had been an avowed Huguenot and in 1561 he was arrested, taken to Bordeaux where he was thrown into prison under sentence of death, and his kilns and workshop destroyed. Luckily his noble friends came to his rescue. They brought about his appointment as Potter to the Queen which automatically procured his release and removal from provincial jurisdiction. He returned to Saintes and later to La Rochelle where he published the first book of which we have accurate knowledge, the "Recepte Veritable." This contained not only his opinions on agriculture, stones, springs and salts, but also a poetic account of his "Delectable Garden" as well as a design for an impregnable fortress. Two years later he removed from Saintes to Paris and for the next quarter of a century spent a comfortable if hard-working life. He was employed by the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici, in the works connected with the building of the Tuilleries and so popular did his smaller works in

pottery become that he found no difficulty in selling, at high prices all he and his assistants could make. Eventually he threw open his museum of natural history and in it delivered discoveries to the learned men of the capital to which he charged a crown (a high sum at that time) for admission. Having done this for several years he published his second, or as some aver, his third book entitled "Discours Admirables" in which appears his celebrated chapter on his own experiences in the making of pottery and his quest for the wonderful enamel which should transform common earthenware into glorious porcelain. But Henry III was as weak as well as a frivolous king and when he put himself at the head of the League of extreme Catholics he could not or would not intercede for his old servant Palissy when the latter was arrested as a Huguenot and thrown into the Bastille. Here he languished for four years till, in

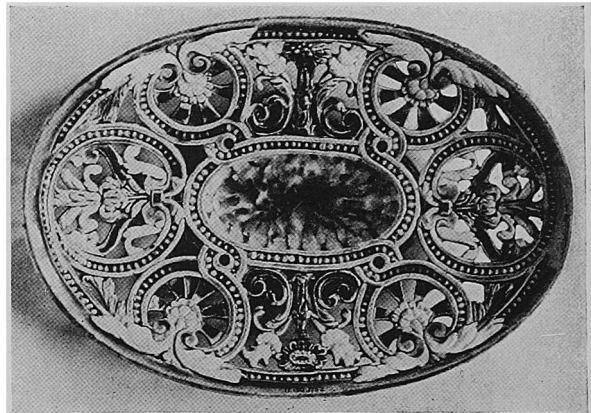


A MOTTLED FLAGON BY BERNARD PALISSY. METRO-  
POLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



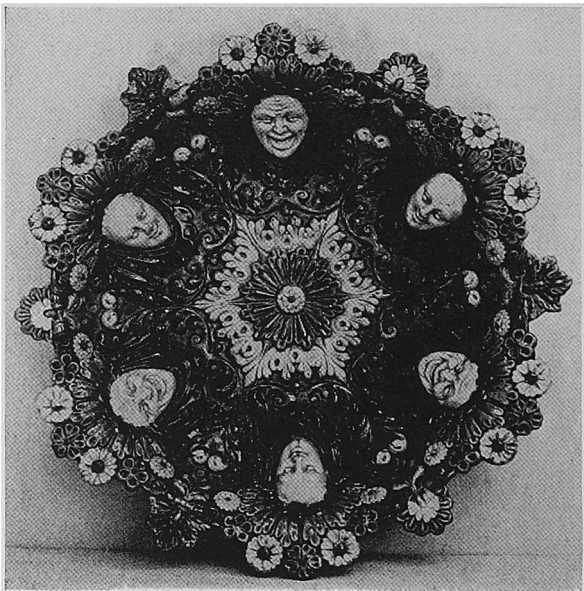
1689, his death saved him from almost certain execution.

This is a brief account of Palissy as a man, and it now remains to consider him as a potter. In the first place, then, what did Palissy try to discover during his fifteen years of stress, struggle and penury? The usual non-expert opinion is that it was the white glaze or enamel as it is ignorantly called, with which Italian majolica was invested. But this differed only in non-essentials from the stanniferous glaze used by the potters of the Saintonge, a fact that a man of Palissy's intellectual attainments could hardly have failed to recognize. I am then thoroughly convinced that it was a piece of Oriental porcelain and not of Italian pottery that won Palissy's admiration. Porcelain began to be imported into Europe in Palissy's day and what is more natural than that he should have seen a porcelain vase which had come into the possession of some of the local nobility? This introduction, from the East, of porcelain appears to have set the whole Western world aflame with the desire to discover the secret of translucency and to make a paste that should rival that of the Chinese. If I am correct in my surmise Palissy was the first to embark on

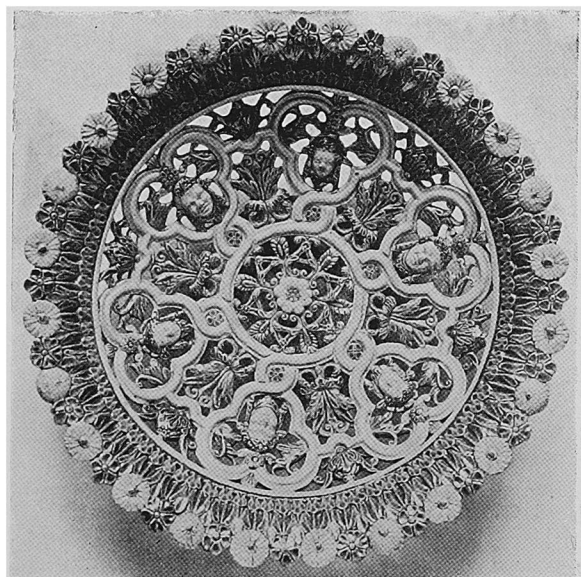


PIERCED DISH BY BERNARD PALISSY. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

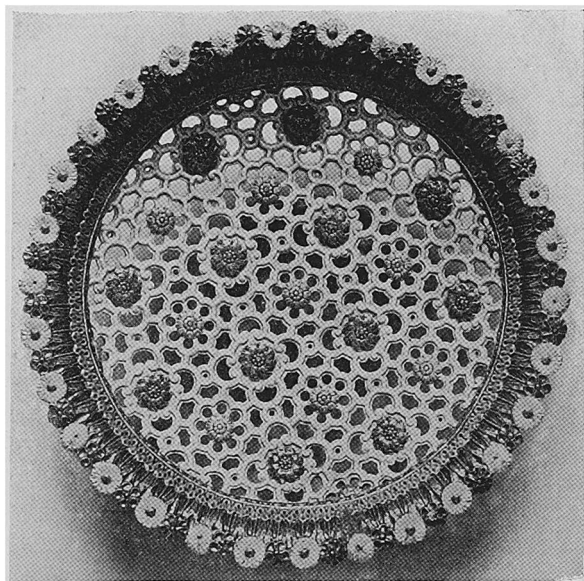
this quest. It was not until he was an old man, in 1780, that Francesco de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, set up a laboratory in San Marco, near Florence, and with the aid of his almost limitless resources produced the first porcelain made in Europe. It was well over a hundred years later that Morin and Chicanneau produced a true porcelain at St. Cloud and that Böttcher, under the patronage of Augustus II. of Poland and Saxony made his china at Meissen near Dresden while the Eighteenth century was drawing to its close when Dr. Wall and William Cookworthy of England experimented until they produced a translucent paste. Palissy, however, took the wrong path when he concluded that the secret lay in the glaze and not in the paste and so he threw away the labor of many years in his unsuccessful endeavor to reproduce Oriental porcelain. But if he did not make porcelain he made himself into an excellent potter. This is to be seen in the pieces he made in his first period before his removal to Paris, namely from 1557 to 1565. These include a series of fruit dishes, some of them pierced with a quatrefoil diaper, others with a design of interlaced strap work both decorated with well modeled masks, and with rims of rosetted flowers and conventional leaves, shell shaped bowls with reclining figures in the interiors, Cherubim wall-plates, escutcheoned portraits and statuettes. Not only in their modeling did these excel but also in the clearness



DISH BY BERNARD PALISSY. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



PIERCED DISH BY BERNARD PALISSY. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



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and vivid hues of the glazes, a fact due not alone to Palissy's years of patient experimenting but also to his knowledge of the value of metallic oxides gained when he was a glass-painter. Of his marvellous grottoes, one made for the Constable Montmorenci, another for the Queen Mother at the Tuilleries, nothing today remains but a few unimportant fragments in museums and a manuscript description which was discovered at La Rochelle by M. Benjamin Fillon and published by him and later in the volume edited by Anatole France. Judging by this account we may safely conclude that Palissy gained his inspirations from a book. This is the more noteworthy as he himself boasted "I have had no book but Heaven and the Earth." This particular volume was the "Dream of Poliphilus" translated into French from the celebrated Italian original, and perhaps the only book that Palissy diligently read and

studied. As to the typical "Palissy Ware," Dishes and Plates decorated in relief with naturalistically modeled fish, reptiles and shells, it belongs incontrovertibly to his latest period. M. Solon had pointed out that the shells of which he made use all belong to the fossils of the Paris basin, which could only have been seen and studied by Palissy after his arrival in Paris, while it was at that period that he first assumed the title of "Inventeur des Rustiques Figulines," a further proof of the late production of this "Palissy-Ware." It may be added that the casts were made direct from the animals themselves, thus accounting for the realistic details, and that the potter is only to be credited with their admirable arrangement and vivid coloring. Of a like imitative description are his reproductions of Briot's Pewter Dishes, for the bizarre coloring of which only he is responsible.

